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# Parental Perspectives on Smartphone Usage. A Qualitative Study of the “Smartphone Usage Agreement” and Other Control Strategies

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# Parental Perspectives on Smartphone Usage. A Qualitative Study of the “Smartphone Usage Agreement” and Other Control Strategies.

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Abstract: The smartphone has become an integral part of contemporary society, and concerns about its effects, especially on younger generations, are increasingly widespread. This article aims to reflect on the strategies of control and family mediation of smartphone usage implemented by parents towards preadolescents and adolescents, with a specific focus on the socio-educational experience of the “Smartphone Usage Agreement”. The Agreement was conceived and experimented within the framework of the “Educare digitale” blog, an Italian blog addressed to parents and educators. Through six in-depth interviews to a sample of parents, opinions regarding the relationship between young people and smartphones and their attitude towards parental mediation were collected. The data highlights a still limited understanding of the characteristics of the media ecosystem by parents and their tendency to resort to control and punishment strategies rather than negotiation based on socio-educational principles. The conclusions lead to the necessity of implementing digital literacy practices based on dialogue and negotiation of meanings between young people and adults, but with an eye towards the need to regulate an increasingly complex media ecosystem.

Keywords: smartphone, Generazione Z, digital risks, parental mediation, digital literacy

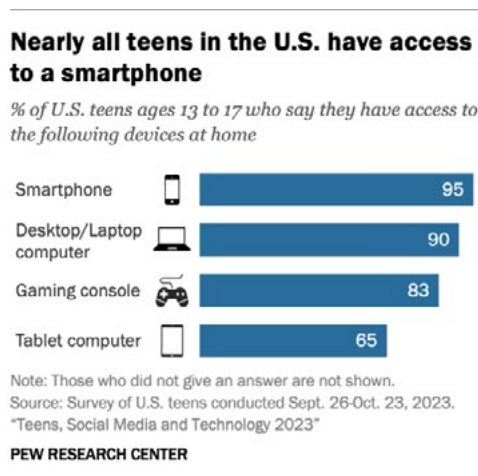
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## Introduction. The smartphone in contemporary society: a technology for social connection

The smartphone is a communication tool that has claimed a central role in people's daily lives, especially with the rapid development of social media and digital platforms. According to data from We Are Social, in 2023, 5.44 billion people use mobile phones, accounting for 68% of the world's population. Furthermore, with 64.4% of people currently online, there are 4.76 billion social media users worldwide, representing just under 60% of the total population (We Are Social, 2023).

While a report published by the Pew Internet & Research Center (2023) indicates that 95% of American teenagers have access to smartphones (Fig. 1), Europe is not far behind. The 57th Report on the Social Situation in the Country (Italy) by Censis (2023) highlights that in Italy, there are 48 million smartphones, an increase of over 6 million in the last five years, and they are used by 88% of the population.

Fig. 1 – Teens and devices in US.



Source: Pew Research Center, 2023

Following the introduction of UMTS (Universal Mobile Telecommunications System) technology in 2000 and the proliferation of iOS (Apple) and Android (Google) operating systems in 2007, the smartphone has become one of the most commonly used devices for connecting to the Internet and engaging in numerous other activities, from accessing information to communication, entertainment, and work (Balbi & Magaudda, 2014; Drusian, Scarcelli & Magaudda, 2022; Belluati & Tirocchi, 2023).

To describe the smartphone, it is useful to employ the notion of the "mobile complex", which focuses on the cultural nature of the device, where

social structures, the agency of users, and their cultural practices converge (Pachler, Cook & Bachmair, 2010; Cook, Pachler & Bachmair, 2011). As argued by Hall & Baym (2011), moreover, the mobile device has become a tool that contributes to the maintenance of social relationships.

Due to new forms of connectivity and interconnection, the smartphone uniquely alters the relationships between the public and private spheres, leading to the phenomenon known as “context collapse” (boyd & Marwick, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2014) and inaugurating a new concept of privacy and a different form of closeness between users, termed “connected intimacy” (Boccia Artieri *et al.*, 2014), as it occurs within an interconnected public space<sup>1</sup>.

Following the transformations of the media ecosystem and the increasing mediatization of social reality, along with the proliferation of screens, the relationship between adolescents and mobile media has emerged at the center of public debate and attention, particularly concerning the dangers associated with their increasingly frequent and early use (Haddon, 2013; Lenhart *et al.*, 2010). With the advent of Web 2.0 and the opportunities offered by social media, especially in terms of sharing and participation related to user-generated content production, attention towards the impact of smartphones intensifies. The new media platforms, together with the mobility and ubiquity features provided by the device, allow adolescents to experience a continuous interchange between online and offline, public and private lives, also representing a privileged space for identity expression and the construction and maintenance of social relationships (Fortunati, 2002; Fortunati & Maganelli, 2002; Goggin, 2006; boyd, 2014; Castells *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, parental control over the thresholds separating the family’s social environments from external spaces, the “inside” from the “outside”, the sphere of intimacy from that of publicity, is increasingly challenging to exercise (Greco, 2014; Aroldi, 2015).

If the management of devices by families, now “connected” (Marinelli, 2013; Aroldi, 2015), is particularly concerning with younger children, it is no less so for adolescents and young adults, who spend a significant portion of their days constantly online (Duggan *et al.*, 2015).

The proliferation of digital platforms, which convey values, behavior models and symbolic worlds that exert a significant impact on people’s lives, especially young people. They do so by establishing new reference models such as influencers or digital creators, which are increasingly relevant in socialization dynamics (Tirocchi, 2023) in a society increasingly characterized by the structuring power of digital platforms (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal,

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<sup>1</sup> Connected intimacy is experienced whenever a user - using tools provided by the platform (such as status updates, liking, tagging, comments) - shares a relational experience in public that refers to a private dimension.

2018). We are talking about a generation we now refer to as Generation Z (Dimock, 2019; Tirocchi, Scocco, & Crespi, 2022), emphasizing its propensity for using digital media and sharing a symbolic and value-based world characterized by authenticity and genuineness (Tirocchi, 2023).

## **Risks of smartphone usage**

The prevalence of smartphones in social life brings to light the issue of risks associated more broadly with the internet and, subsequently, with the widespread use of devices that possess unique characteristics.

Digital risks have been thematized, particularly by the research group led by Sonia Livingstone in the context of the multi-year experience associated with the EU Kids Online projects. Livingstone proposes a classification model, known as the 4Cs, which identifies four main dimensions of risk: content, contact, conduct, and contract (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). The “contract” dimension, added recently, reflects the rise in the commercialization of children’s personal data, arguably resulting in the “datafication” of children themselves (Mascheroni, 2020).

One of the most widespread risks is still cyberbullying in its various manifestations, from the acted to the observed, from the more serious to the perhaps less detectable but no less worrying. Unfortunately, data on this phenomenon are not homogeneous, but available for different age groups from different sources (Save the Children, 2023).

Regarding the issue of risks, the concept of “digital well-being” has also been introduced in the debate (Gui *et al.*, 2017; Büchi, 2024), which refers to the need and possibility of maintaining a state of well-being even in conditions of communication overabundance. Furthermore, in this strand of studies, a vast body of literature has focused on concerns related to the negative effects of smartphones on individual and social life, identifying problems such as deteriorating academic performance, lack of concentration, procrastination, poorer sleep quality, lower satisfaction with body perception, and lower quality of offline social experiences<sup>2</sup>.

Thematizing risks and reflecting on how to address them is, in our view, linked to the perspective of media education and digital education conceived as critical capacity for the consumption of media messages, capable of addressing the dangers of the internet from an educational perspective and through dialogical confrontation with socialization agencies, particularly families and schools (Buckingham, 2013; Tirocchi, 2013; Potter, 2019).

Building upon this framework, the article aims to present a reflection on the socio-educational device of the “Smartphone Usage Agreement” (intro-

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Gui *et al.*, 2017.

duced by the blog “Educare Digitale”) supported by research experience, to ascertain how the Agreement fits into and is perceived within parental practices and strategies for controlling and managing the device, and to reflect on the strategies implemented by parents to address problematic situations.

Research of this kind, albeit limited in terms of its extent, is important in an increasingly complex digital social context where there is a lack of systematic institutional interventions and where the debate on smartphone usage in schools is still very intense and unresolved (Tirocchi, 2015).

### **The smartphone in the family: between mediation and control**

The use of smartphones by children and adolescents and the issue of risks necessarily involve the family environment since it is the primary setting for growth and socialization. In this sense, the smartphone is implicated, just like other technologies, in a process of domestication, referring to how communicative technologies become integrated into places, contexts, and daily routines, and how people use them and attribute meanings to them (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1990; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996).

As Terras and Ramsay (2016) state, the use of mobile digital devices occurs within informal family contexts and interacts, from an ecological perspective, with social practices involving the spaces and people surrounding the adolescent (parents, relatives, classmates, friends), sometimes serving as facilitators of social relationships (Taddeo & Tirocchi, 2014), and other times as obstacles to those relationships.

Within the family and with parents, adolescents negotiate a series of rules and constraints related to the use of mobile devices, a use that has become increasingly difficult for parents to monitor, due to the fluid and ubiquitous characteristics of mobile communication, mediated through power relations (Haddon, 2003; 2013).

It’s evident that one of the key aspects to consider in light of this framework is the strategies parents employ to control their children’s smartphone usage (Duggan *et al.*, 2015; Ramírez-García, González-Fernández & Salcines-Talledo, 2023).

Livingstone *et al.* (2011), in a study across 25 European countries involving children aged 9-16 years, identified five main types of parental mediation to regulate internet and mobile media:

1. *Active mediation of internet use*: aimed at discussion of internet content and online activities, as well as participation in joint online activities.
2. *Active mediation of internet safety*: aimed at promoting safe internet use.
3. *Restrictive mediation*: aimed at restricting online access in terms of time, activity, content, and usage.

4. *Technical restrictions*: aimed at the use of technological filters to limit and monitor online activities.
5. *Monitoring*: aimed at a posteriori control of internet activities.

The data from the research shows that active mediation of use and safety are the most frequently employed strategies for children aged 9-16 years, with more restrictive practices being used for younger children.

Parental mediation has been defined by Livingstone and Helsper (2008) as well as the parental management of the relationship that children generate with the media and subsequently as “the diverse practices through which parents try to manage and regulate their children’s experiences with the media” (Livingstone *et al.*, 2015, p. 7).

Later, Livingstone *et al.* (2017) condensed the number of strategies into two groups: “empowered mediation” and “restrictive mediation”.

Zaman *et al.* (2016) analyzed digital media parental mediation strategies with children aged 3-9 and concluded that five strategies exist: (1) restrictive; (2) active; (3) sharing; (4) participatory learning; and (5) distance mediation.

Symons, Ponnet, Emery, Walrave and Heirman (2017) identified six mediation strategies with respect to internet use: (1) interaction restrictions; (2) monitoring; (3) access restriction; (4) supervision and sharing; (5) technical mediation; and (6) interpretative mediation.

Among the strategies used, discursive mediation strategy, especially used in the US, is also notable (Clark, 2013).

Another identified control strategy is self-regulation, centered on the autonomy of the youngest. Building upon the Teen Online Safety Strategies (TOSS) framework, which conceptualizes the dichotomy between parental control and teen self-regulation in the context of adolescent online safety, Badillo-Urquiola *et al.* (2020) identified three primary parental mediation strategies (monitoring, restriction and active mediation) and three teen self-regulation strategies (self-monitoring, impulse control and risk-coping).

All these strategies are alternately utilized in different countries and, under certain conditions, they function differently. Nonetheless, they underscore a societal need to safeguard an environment that is increasingly treacherous and fraught with challenges.

### **The “Smartphone Rule Generator”: purpose, structure, agreement**

The “Smartphone Rule Generator” was created within the framework of the “Educaoredigitale.it”<sup>3</sup> blog, a platform established in 2017 with the aim

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.educaoredigitale.it/>. The creator of the blog is Daniele Catozzella, one of the authors of this article.

of providing parents with ideas, insights, and practical tools to address the digital integration into their children's daily lives and, more broadly, into families. The blog's slogan, "the ways of educating don't change, the challenges do", expresses the need for educators to confront the new educational challenges arising in an increasingly complex and interconnected world, as previously described.

The digital content offered since 2017, in the form of articles, videos, infographics, and podcasts, aims to promote an active, aware, and informed parental figure regarding the mechanisms and dynamics of the internet, video games, social media, and digital devices in general. The blog offers users free gaming-based educational content. Among the most appreciated is the "Goose Game", which supplements the classic rules of the game with a series of "question cards" designed to stimulate dialogue between parents and children.

### **From the "Smartphone Rule Generator" to the "Smartphone Usage Agreement"**

One of the tools offered as part of the blog's activities is the "Smartphone Rule Generator", made available free of charge to blog users since 2018. It consists of a structured questionnaire presented through Google Forms (with the implementation of an additional component, Form Publisher) targeting parents with children aged 8 to 16. Completion of the questionnaire by parents generates a document automatically emailed to the parent, defined as the "Smartphone Usage Agreement". This Agreement entails the acceptance and sharing, between parents and children, of a set of rules for device usage. The Agreement details the choices made for each described area, the date of completion or the date of viewing/acceptance, and space for the signatures of both the parent and the child.

The objectives of the "Smartphone Rule Generator" and, consequently, of the Smartphone Usage Agreement are:

1. To increase parents' awareness regarding the presence of smartphones within the family.
2. To establish mutual sharing and accountability between parents and children regarding the rules of device usage, potential penalties for non-compliance, monitoring, and the potential updating or redefinition of the rules themselves.

The Generator (and thus the initial questionnaire) is divided into nine sections:

- a. *Settings*: Includes choices regarding filter controls, geolocation, lock screen password sharing between parents and children.



- b. *Calls*: Involves choices regarding call behavior, particularly in relation to who to answer (known, unknown, etc.), and sharing of contacts from the address book.
- c. *Time management*: Includes choices about device usage times (possibility or not of usage during shared moments, such as dinner, or before sleep).
- d. *Store*: Area related to managing the choice and necessary steps before downloading an application from the store (authorization, considerations like PEGI, communication, or preventive control).
- e. *Gaming*: Defines gaming times, gaming modes, and multiplayer modes, including control over shared gaming with friends or strangers.
- f. *Photos and videos*: Defines processes for sharing personal images or videos.
- g. *Chat*: Defines digital platforms that can be used, data that can be shared, and potential parental control systems.
- h. *Social media*: Area dedicated to defining behavior for managing social media profiles, including potential parental control.
- i. *Control*: Specifically dedicated section for defining times and control over smartphone activities.

At the beginning and end of the questionnaire, there is also an open-ended question, a kind of “letter” space, where the parent can add observations that will be recorded at the beginning of the automatically generated agreement. Additionally, there is a final section where parents can write what would happen if the rules were not followed.

In the process of completing the questionnaire-Generator, parents are involved in two distinct phases. In the first phase, they are asked to respond to a series of questions to choose the rules they believe are most effective for managing and using the smartphone. In the second part, they are encouraged to propose and share the generated rules in the form of an agreement with their children.

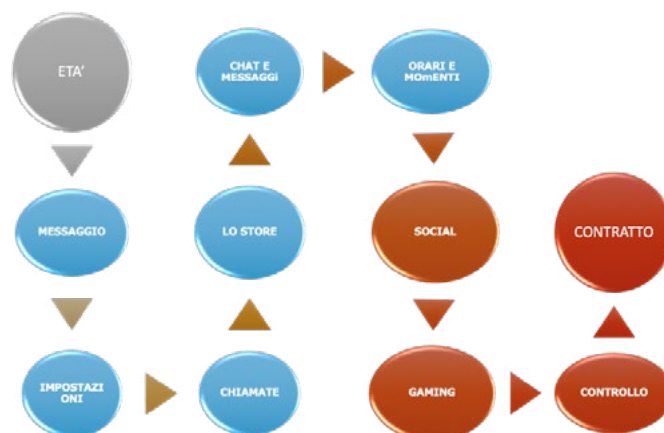
The “Smartphone Usage Agreement” promotes a negotiated agreement in which each party (parent and child/children) recognizes the other as a partner, sharing clear rules, sanctions, validity periods, and mutual responsibilities. The acceptance phase through the signing of the Agreement is just the beginning of an agreement that unfolds over time through monitoring and negotiation of the established rules.

Within this verification process and subsequent renegotiations, children should gain awareness of smartphone usage, assuming greater bargaining power provided that the rules have been respected. In this sense, if the empowerment process activated by the Agreement has positive effects, the rules should become critical and conscious acquisitions for the child regard-

ing “positive” smartphone use, shifting the perspective to the children and their progressive acquisition of responsibility.

The Agreement also aims to promote the sharing of children’s digital experiences to stimulate dialogue on aspects involving the use of technology in daily life. The goal is to reflect not only on how much time the child spends in the digital realm (for example, in terms of hours spent with the smartphone) but to openly discuss what, namely the content of online experiences.

Fig. 2 -Smartphone Rule Generator: process illustration.



## Methodology

The research project titled “Positive and Negative Aspects of the Smartphone Usage Agreement: A Parental Perspective” aimed to analyze the experience of the Smartphone Rule Generator.

The research was conducted between March and August 2023 by the University of Turin, in collaboration with Daniele Catozzella, author of the blog “Educare digitale” and creator of the Agreement.

The project involved a non-probabilistic “targeted” sample of 14 parents aged between 36 and 60 years, including twelve mothers and two fathers, residing in various regions of Italy. The children of the interviewees fall within the age range of 11 to 18 years, fitting into the so-called Generation Z.

The research was developed in two distinct phases: in the first, a semi-structured/sheet containing open-ended questions was administered to the group of fourteen parents who had filled out the questionnaire aimed at the construction of the Usage Agreement; subsequently, six parents were selected from this group to conduct in-depth interviews analysing some specific themes, some of which emerged substantially in the questionnaire com-

pletion. We focused the analysis on the questionnaires and interviews of the six participants, i.e. those interviewed among the fourteen parents initially involved, to have a more complex picture that the mixed qualitative-quantitative analysis could provide. Despite this, we cannot fail to mention the fact that the remaining eight questionnaires (of fourteen), completed in the initial phase of the research, allowed us to have a more varied perspective and multiple insights even for creating the interview guide. Among the six parents selected, only two chose to experiment fully with the “Smartphone Usage Agreement” to manage their children’s smartphone use, while the other four parents analyzed and considered it, but incorporated it within their own informal smartphone parenting strategy.

Table 1 - Sample of Interviewees - Descriptive Overview

Parent	Age	Gender	Occupation	Number of children	Age(s) of child(ren)	Gender of child(ren)
G	48 years old	Male	Lawyer	1	14 years old	Female
A	55 years old	Male	University Professor	1	11 years old	Male
S	47 years old	Female	Psychologist	2	11, 9 years old	Female/Male
F	45 years old	Female	Teacher	2	13, 16 years old	Male/Male
T	44 years old	Female	Employee	2	13 years old	Male/Male
C	49 years old	Female	Employee	2	13, 16 years old	Female/Male

The main research questions of the study were:

*RQ1 - What is the parents’ attitude towards digital technologies, particularly smartphones?*

*RQ2 - What are the control strategies used by parents regarding smartphone usage?*

*RQ3 - What are the opinions and attitudes of parents towards the “Smartphone Usage Agreement” proposed by the “Educare digitale” blog?*

The use of a qualitative approach (Brenner, 2021) allowed for the observation, from various perspectives, of the use of technologies within the parent-child relationship, enabling the exploration of relational and intergenerational dynamics of family mediation and re-mediation related to parental

media governance (Tarozzi, 2007) in an era of substantial disintermediation (Greco, 2014).

The semi-structured questionnaire comprised four thematic sections with 19 questions, including 15 closed-ended and 4 open-ended questions. It was constructed using Google Form's "Modules" function to allow dissemination via a link and was specifically aimed at constructing the interview outline.

After obtaining an overview of the emerging themes, the interviews provided an opportunity to delve deeper into the relationship between parents and children regarding smartphone and digital device usage.

Conducting the investigation in two phases proved useful for establishing a relationship of continuity and trust between the researchers and the interviewees. Conducted online using Zoom and Google Meet platforms (Irani, 2019), the in-depth interviews allowed for the exploration of the following dimensions:

- *Parental use of smartphones and other digital devices*
- *Children's use of smartphones and other digital devices*
- *Parental control strategies: rules, sanctions, time limits, etc.*
- *Major concerns and fears about smartphone and technology use*
- *Parental perspective on the "Smartphone Usage Agreement"*
- *Opinion on the utility of the Agreement and other informal strategies of management*
- *Opinion on smartphone use in the educational setting*
- *Opinion on new forms of artificial intelligence (particularly Chat GPT) in relation to young people.*

The in-depth interviews, conducted from May to August 2023, were recorded, digitally transcribed, and subsequently analysed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 14 (for Windows), which allows for the storage, organization, and analysis of various types and formats of information: texts, audio, video, and content from social networks.

Through the functionalities provided by the software, the interviews were first uploaded separately using the "Data" function in the "Files" folder, and then coded in two modes: top-down and bottom-up.

In the first mode, each interview was coded by highlighting the thematic nodes (*codes*) that emerged from the reference literature and research questions. In the second mode, bottom-up, the nodes were instead elicited from the analysis of the interview texts through several re-readings of the text. Both groups of themes were coded within a single grid that was created.

## **Results. Analysis of in-depth interviews with parents**

The thematic nodes and sub-nodes that emerged from the analysis of the interview texts and were coded using NVivo are as follows:

1. *Generational Gap*
  - Unawareness of the hybrid dimension of social reality (online/offline)
  - Unawareness of the potential of digital technologies (for themselves and for their children)
2. *False Self-representation of Parents in Relation to Technologies*
3. *Risks and Concerns*
  - Impact of artificial intelligence
  - Role of influencers
4. *Parental Mediation Strategies*
  - Technical control through apps
  - Negotiation and dialogue strategies
5. *Smartphone Use at School*
  - Instrumental
  - Non-instrumental
  - *Attitudes and Opinions Towards the Agreement*
6. Figure 2 shows the different references identified within the interviews.

Fig. 2 - Map of Nodes and Subnodes Coded with NVivo

CODES/NODES		
Names of codes/nodes	Files	References
1. Attitude and opinions towards the agreement	4	9
2. False Self-representation of Parents	5	10
3. Generational gap	2	4
Unawareness of the hybrid dimension of social reality (online/offline)	5	8
Unawareness of the potential of digital technologies	2	2
4. Risks and concerns	6	22
Impact of artificial intelligence	6	11
Role of influencers	1	5
5. Parental mediation strategies	5	19
Technical control through apps	5	15
Negotiation and dialogue strategies	3	6
6. Smartphone use at school	6	16
Instrumental	2	2
Non-instrumental	4	7

In the following section we analyze, in detail, the results related to the different nodes and subnodes.

## **The Generational Gap - Between unawareness and control**

The responses from the interviewees reveal a lack of awareness regarding the interaction between the online and offline dimensions in contemporary daily life. Both aspects indicate a profound intergenerational gap between adults and young people, which is linked to a fracture often highlighted between different generations. From the responses, a general unawareness emerges regarding the use and potential of digital technologies, from the spread of the Internet and social media to the most recent technological developments, such as artificial intelligence.

### ***Difficulty Understanding and Interpreting the Hybrid Dimension of Social Reality (Online/Offline)***

Parents are united by the problem of distinguishing between the digital sphere and the “real” dimension. Today, in the context of the platform society (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018), it is not easy to distinguish between the online/offline dimensions because, as we have seen in the introduction, the two dimensions are deeply interconnected, but parents do not seem to fully grasp this aspect. Regarding this dimension, one of the interviewees criticizes the hybrid/onlife condition (Floridi, 2014) of interpersonal relationships, highlighting the existence of a total misalignment between the real and virtual. According to this viewpoint, the online dimension would not be as authentic and healthy as the offline one. For this reason, young people would not have the structures to support interpersonal relationships in the digital reality, nor would they have the tools to manage relationships in a context that is perceived by parents as being disaligned from the real one:

*It is this plane that has shifted between real reality and virtual reality, so these communications that take place online as if they were in person. People breaking up rather than people getting engaged, rather than conflicts. If these things are reported to me by adults, I imagine what happens with children who do not have the structures to cope [S, female, 47].*

### ***Inconsistency of Awareness Regarding the Potential of Digital Technologies (for Themselves and for Their Children)***

The second sub-node identifiable within the “Generation Gap” node concerns the limited recognition of the socialization function fulfilled by new digital environments, which are instead seen as environments that detract from time spent on so-called “physical” and therefore presumed “real” socialization, leading young people to isolate themselves from the concrete world:

*The aspect that concerns me most is the time that smartphones take away from socialization because undoubtedly a teenage boy is inclined to isolate himself with a smartphone. The fact that one lives through*

*images, through social media, and does not experience real life, which is also somewhat what happens to us adults, is worrying for me. Undoubtedly, experiencing experiences through a screen or experiencing them in person is not the same thing. Let's say that the tendency of a boy who is attracted to smartphones, to video games, is to go out less, to isolate himself, and, in my opinion, it's not healthy [T, female, 44].*

*Make them appreciate the real things in life, sports, music, being together, seeing things, appreciating things outside so that the smartphone then becomes just a tool to photograph them, to share them. It should not be an empty container in which they... it must still be an added tool to their life [T, female, 44].*

Sometimes it seems that the parent realizes this aspect and the fact that not using the smartphone can become a reason for social exclusion for young people:

*It is a tool that almost everyone uses and that is an important part of teenagers' social life. If you take it away from them, you may also do well from an educational point of view, but there is something... you still risk making them almost an outcast [A, male, 55].*

*WhatsApp yes. For example, my daughter was out for five days and WhatsApp was our favorite tool [C, female, 49].*

*I sometimes have to tell my daughter Greta, 'I can't make it to the school pick-up on time, see you at home, walk back.' That's a necessary use [G, male, 48].*

## **False Self-Representation of Parents Regarding Technology**

An aspect that clearly emerges from the interviews concerns the self-representation constructed by parents in relation to their own use of smartphones. Parents outline, in their narratives, a model of consumption that is particularly aware, responsible, and capable of critically using digital devices. Furthermore, the type of usage delineated in their testimonies is limited to the informational and work-related dimension, without intercepting the playful and leisure dimension. This, therefore, would function to underscore a differentiation between the "presumed" conscious and moderate parental usage and the immature and excessive smartphone usage of their children.

*I use it in my spare time at home or at work, when I'm working. These are the uses. If I had to tell you how much time I use it, I think between half an hour and an hour a day. The apps I use the most are definitely Twitter, a little Instagram, some Facebook, and a lot of online information, mainly "Repubblica.it [A, male, 55].*

*My daily use is mainly messaging on WhatsApp, checking emails, checking if important messages or emails have arrived, which are significant for my work. Additionally, most of the time I go on Google, so on the Google app. Sometimes I book museums through websites, more than anything else. So, I have to be honest, I don't use it much [F, female, 45].*

*I work with the phone, aside from emails that I read both for work and not for work. Among the main apps I use, there's WhatsApp, which allows me to collaborate with my office and more. As for social media, I only have WhatsApp, I don't have Facebook, I don't have Instagram. WhatsApp is enough [T, female, 44].*

This attitude of parents seems to reproduce the age-old problem of the gap between “book cultures” and “screen cultures” (Tirocchi, Andò & Antenore, 2002), which unfortunately has also been the basis for many delays in the spread of technologies in schools, in politics, and more generally, throughout Italian society.

## **Risks and Concerns**

One of the most discussed topics among parents concerns the issue of online risks, ranging from pedophilia to pornography to cyberbullying (Tirocchi, Scocco & Crespi, 2022). These are dangers that children may encounter due to their inattention or naivety. Beyond a concern for real risks, parents perceive these dangers particularly intensely due to a lack of understanding of the use of digital technologies, which prevents the construction of effective protection and safeguarding strategies, contributing to making parental mediation more fragile.

*The first thing [that scares me] is that he might meet people he'd better not meet, I'm talking about pedophiles but also about kids more or less his same age who abuse these kinds of things. The second thing that worries me is online pornography [A, male, 55].*

There is also concern about pornography as the sole channel for sexual socialization, admitting thus a certain inability of parents to compensate for this lack of knowledge.

*The second thing that worries me is online pornography because clearly there comes a time and the need to understand from a certain point of view. He certainly has curiosities, but I don't know if that's the best way to satisfy them [A, male, 55].*

Another particularly feared danger is that of bullying, one of the most worrying trends still affecting young people:



*Another aspect that worries me a lot is [...] the fact that a word said badly on a chat can then have a strong resonance at the group level or an image. It's easier to become a target of bullying for more people because the chat includes many people, whereas before you were teased in person, but there it can spread more [T, female, 44].*

A worrying theme relates also to identity theft.

*What concerns me is definitely identity theft. I'm concerned about anything related to a betrayed innocence because my children are at an age where they can't discriminate well between what's good and what's not good [S, female, 47].*

Lastly, parents identify other risks that are perhaps less mentioned but certainly should not be underestimated, as they can affect the mood and emotional states of the children:

*The more he's on his smartphone, the more he tends to be nervous. [...] [and] he's also very distracted [A, male, 55].*

Finally, there are risks related to a reduction in reading:

*But the smartphone takes a lot of time away from reading. For example, from my experience, one of my two children used to read a lot, which is not a given but is very subjective, but the smartphone has taken him away from reading. This is an aspect of excessive smartphone use that bothers me [T, female, 44].*

### **Artificial Intelligence**

Regarding the issue of developments in artificial intelligence and the use of ChatGPT (which represents an example of generative artificial intelligence), there is a general lack of information from parents, accompanied by their unawareness that prevents them from understanding the extraordinary scope of the innovation. This lack of knowledge leads, once again, to a negative, distorted, and worried approach. The prevailing parental view of AI is that of a technical expedient that could facilitate task management and reduce the effort and responsibility of students towards their studies.

*I think it could become a shortcut for students who are not very willing [A, male, 55].*

*They know they can have everything instantly, so I think this thing with ChatGPT is another step towards this, of having everything easier [T, female, 44].*

*It's not suitable for students. As for us as a generation, I don't know, I don't have a clear idea about this artificial intelligence yet [C, female, 49].*

### ***The influencers***

Among the risks mentioned by parents, there is concern about the potential negative influences of the so-called influencers or digital creators, followed by youngest on various platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or TikTok. Influencers have become particularly significant figures for young people, and their impact has increased considerably. They can persuade and influence their audiences with their language and communication style, which is also expressed through the choice of a certain type of clothing. As noted by Page (2012), influencers often adopt a conversational, informal, and authentic style characterized using colloquial language, emojis, and hashtags, which allows them to engage their followers more effectively.

Parents fear the potential danger of these models:

*Ciccio gamer is crazy, he plays video games. He has this strongly Roman accent but often says swear words or another one... I can't remember now... he's terrible, he even blasphemes. But they also use language that is not suitable... so much so that I immediately notice after they've watched something, their language changes. [...] So I've completely forbidden it [F, female, 45].*

From the words of one of the interviewees, in particular, emerges not only the fear of violent and inappropriate content produced by some *influencers* but also of the language itself that is almost naturally assimilated by the young people:

*However, unfortunately, if they start to see or associate with people who only think about sex, swear words, it's clear that... Unfortunately, social media, but also through smartphones, they are influenced and led to a certain type of style [F, female, 45].*

*Some influencers are angry, very aggressive in their language with terms that are not suitable even for what they are doing and so on [F, female, 45].*

*Let's have a 'carbocrema', you can ask any boy of their age group and they know what 'carbocrema' is [F, female, 45].*

## **Parental Mediation Strategies**

### ***Technical Strategies***

Parental concerns translate, for our sample of interviewed parents, into a series of technical control strategies. Through the parental control functions of smartphones and the various restrictions provided by some apps, parental governance primarily acts on the usage time of the device, the connection,

and the use of applications. However, very often, technical strategies like Family Link, which according to some studies contribute to regulating and limiting smartphone usage (Ko *et al.*, 2015), seem ineffective in bypassing problems related to risks in accessing certain content.

*We try to use [parental control] but it's not feasible because practically many of these applications, the ones that children like the most, don't work if you have installed Family Link. So practically they ask you to use this thing and this thing is incompatible with the installation of Family Link [A, male, 55].*

*They [the children] have a limit of 3 hours, and it's a lot. After 3 hours, the smartphone locks. You can practically limit the usage time of the smartphone through Family Link. Then, well, we also activated location tracking, but this is a related thing because there are links that can allow you to see where they are [C, female, 44].*

*We have set a rule that [his smartphone] doesn't have the SIM card. Internet connection is done by authorization, and downloading applications is done by authorization [S, female, 47].*

*Then obviously, at the table, the smartphone is not kept, this is another rule when eating [T, female, 44].*

In addition to the use of technical control strategies, parental governance also manifests informally in the periodic monitoring of conversations in their children's group chats (particularly WhatsApp), in monitoring the content viewed on the web (browsing history), or in parental mediation strategies that have proven effective from their perspective, such as eliminating the use of smartphone earphones, allowing parents to monitor the content consumed by their children.

Even parents who claim to have established a dialogue with their children about the use and potential risks of the digital world still report implementing limiting strategies coercively, such as various forms of threats and punishment.

*I threatened them that they shouldn't watch [YouTube videos] because otherwise they would face the consequences [F, female, 45].*

*We pay for the recharge, either me or my husband. We pay for it, and 'you should know it's for our needs, not yours. [C, female, 49].*

It is also interesting to note the opinion that it is necessary to distract from the device with other activities to distance oneself from it, with no recourse to dialogue or reflection between parents and children.

*The only feasible strategy here is, in my opinion, to have them engage in activities with other children in person that distract them from this. We enrolled him in the scouts, and he goes willingly, and it seems to be the only thing that takes away his fixation on the tablet [A, male, 55].*

## **The use of smartphones in schools**

### ***Instrumental and non-instrumental use***

Regarding the use of smartphones in schools, the interviewed parents express skepticism and a purely instrumental view of the device. They see smartphones as suitable for managing educational materials, electronic registers, or ensuring communication between school and family.

*I don't see smartphones in education very well; it doesn't seem suitable to me because the screen is too small, so it's not suitable from my point of view [A, male, 55].*

On the other hand, the tablet seems to serve the sole purpose of lightening the backpack:

*It would be useful to provide all children with tablets, especially for one reason. It's not possible to carry such an absurd load of books, and with a tablet, they could have the books loaded onto the memory without carrying all this weight, which is completely unjustified [A, male, 55].*

Parents thus undervalue the potential of the device to encourage active and autonomous learning, student involvement, and the personalization of teaching based on the needs and inclinations of individual students. The only exception is when discussing applications for students with special needs, such as dysgraphia:

*My son is certified with dysgraphia, so the smartphone is a good solution to allow him to do his homework, where writing on paper would be more problematic [A, male, 55].*

These responses underscore, on one hand, the unawareness of the benefits of technology for learning and teaching, and on the other hand, they represent a devaluation of hybrid or digital teaching. Recognition of the potential of smartphones in schools only emerges concerning the role played by smartphones during Covid-related restrictions when students were forced to remain seated at their desks during breaks.

*During the time of Covid, it was an excellent element because everyone was wearing masks, they couldn't move [...]. They didn't know each other well, and it was thanks to the phone, they all played a game together on the phone, so these poor kids socialized. In that moment, the phone was also an element of aggregation [C, female, 49].*

Furthermore, this aspect is in line with the latest measures taken, particularly in Italy. At the beginning of 2024, the Minister of Education expressed opposition to cell phones and tablets in schools, imposing a “ban” even for educational purposes, with the aim of minimizing sources of distraction during lessons (Cerasa, 2024).

### **Attitudes and Opinions Towards the Agreement**

The responses from the in-depth interviews and the qualitative sheets regarding the “Smartphone Rule Generator” provided an opportunity to discuss with parents about the “Smartphone Usage Agreement” as a tool to facilitate dialogue and negotiation between parents and teenagers, both in case it had been used by parents to its full potential and in case it had been the subject of reflection and comparison with other control tools or informal negotiation experiences.

Beyond the effect it had on young people, the interviews show that an important first result of the Agreement was the awareness-raising and informative action exercised toward parents. The interviews, in fact, also revealed the value of filling out the agreement in terms of personal reflection and the acquisition of information related to elements that need special educational attention and that parents need. This information is not always easy to come by, as it is not easy to find “courses” that teach parents how to regulate smartphone use (both with their children, but also for themselves)

In this sense, the Agreement has been an opportunity for critical reflection on one’s own media use and for thematizing and “testing” the dialogue between parent and child on the use of digital technologies.

Two different attitudes, apparently antithetical, emerge from the responses: the first is a widespread mistrust towards this tool, partly because it is not well understood, and partly because it is not seen as a space for dialogue between adults and young people, potentially contributing to a reduction in the generational gap.

In support of this position, we note statements that show how it is mistakenly perceived as something of little use or as a “rule imposed” rather than as an opportunity:

*The sense of responsibility should also come from the teenagers themselves, in the sense that an Agreement cannot change things [...] Then, if we talk about the Agreement itself, for me, the only real rule to give them is not to use it 24 hours a day [T, female, 44].*

*Anyway, you cannot impose a rule, but it must be understood... this applies to smartphones as well as to everything else in life [...] but honestly,*

*I always see the idea of an imposed rule as something that doesn't have the right effect [T, female, 44].*

*This Agreement could be very effective, it could bring excellent results if there was direct and effective collaboration between the adult and the minor. However, from my experience both as a mother and as a teacher, I know that minors, teenagers in general, tend to circumvent this type of Agreement" [F, female, 45].*

*I think it's not so useful because in the case of my thirteen-year-old children, they must acquire the awareness themselves that they should not abuse smartphones and that it should not take away time from sports and leisure activities [G, male, 48].*

On the other hand, however, in some comments, there is also a positive inclination towards the Agreement, especially regarding its ability to help establish "rules" and "identify boundaries and move within them":

*I believe that respecting rules is necessary and healthy. And that it can help children understand how it should be used. Handing a smartphone to a child is like putting them behind the wheel of a car without knowing how it works. An Agreement will also help us parents [F, female, 45].*

*I think it's useful to ground decisions, substantiate them with real data, and explain potential dangers [A, male, 55].*

*I think it's a very useful tool for parents and children to 'play with open cards' and educate themselves about the value of things and choices [T, female, 44].*

In this sense, the Agreement appears as a container that can help parents and children in negotiation, in understanding services (and how to use them), or aspects related to safety, as it provides an opportunity to discuss with the children and create a space for negotiation and comparison, for example on the need to learn how to filter information and bad habits related to sharing practices. And it is precisely the sharing that is a key element of these practices, as we can deduce from these responses:

*The description of the various aspects related to smartphone use (identity theft, violent messages, etc.) allowed me firstly to open up a horizon of danger and dependence that I considered little or not at all, furthermore, to set a clear and shared use of a tool that has its utility. The aspect of sharing meanings and actions is the part that, in my opinion, makes everyone responsible and makes the choice consistent [T, female, 44].*

*Working on these issues, I was already aware of the risks, but you never stop learning. Perhaps experiencing it firsthand made me understand that sharing rules is the best way to enforce them [G, male, 48].*

*The Agreement allowed me to discuss with my daughters the many aspects to pay attention to and to understand, also, their need to relate to their peer group using the smartphone. [...] We discussed [...] the need to learn to filter information. We also talked about aspects related to privacy and the bad habit, in my opinion, of sharing snippets of conversations between friends with third parties, a kind of documented gossip [G, male, 48].*

*Honestly, I hope it helps me teach them a balanced and not excessive use of the smartphone, because it scares me a lot. For the time it takes away from studying, reading, outdoor activities, playing an instrument, and talking... talking with friends, looking them in the face. And because with a smartphone terrible action can be carried out. I think of cyberbullying. And then there are social media... another terrible tool put into anyone's hands. Not to mention the need to learn to filter information... [T, female, 44].*

And again, we notice the difficulty of thinking of the digital and the “real” as two integrated and not separate dimensions:

*I expect the kids to feel empowered and learn to manage their needs with the awareness of being able to choose between different tools: the wall with friends and the libraries with the scent of books [T, female, 44].*

In this last testimony, the interviewee refers to two spaces of sociability that could call into question the idea of the *authenticity of the relationships* created there: the wall, i.e. a traditional outdoor meeting place, such as public gardens, which refer to an idea of youthful sociability not intermediated by smartphones, and libraries, places traditionally predisposed to a deeper, reflective knowledge through reading. This quotation shows how there is also an unawareness of the relationships that are nowadays built in these spaces where, in gardens, young people come together to play the same videogame, read chat messages, take selfies and so on; while in the library, research and reading also take place on digital devices, made available by the library itself.

In conclusion, the in-depth interviews reveal a greater willingness of some professional groups to accept forms of consumption/usage regulation such as the Agreement. The two freelancers (psychologist and lawyer), as well as one of the parents who works as employee seem to be more aware of the risks but also the opportunities of the smartphone, thus showing themselves more willing to experiment with forms of consumption negotiation that are shared.

On the other hand, the categories that seem most reluctant to use it are precisely those of teachers and university professors. Indeed, it seems the latter are the ones who are most concerned about the impact of the smartphone in the lives of children, which leads them to be skeptical of these forms of consumption regulation. They prefer the “control” that can be exercised, for

example, by asking their sons to remove their headphones in order to listen to (and check) the content of the videos displayed on the different platforms or by limiting the hours their children spend in front of the screens.

### **Conclusions. Towards the sharing of a new digital awareness**

The results of the qualitative investigation conducted starting from the proposal of the “Smartphone Usage Agreement” revealed a series of evidences that offer interesting insights regarding the present and future use of the device by adolescents. The urgency of researching these topics is driven especially by concerns about the impact and pervasiveness of mobile communication. Regarding question Q1, *parents’ attitudes towards digital technologies, particularly smartphones, first highlight the difficulty, on the part of adults, in recognizing the meta-device nature of the smartphone and the adults’ limited awareness of the existence of a hybrid dimension of social reality.* The underestimation of the impact of technologies by parents gives rise to a reassuring and “normalized” self-representation of their media habits, which is quite distant from reality, in line with self-representations that have always characterized parents and teachers in relation to screen cultures (Tirocchi, Andò & Antenore, 2002). Regarding RQ2, *the research shows that parents adopt a model of “technical control”, entirely focused on technologies, which contrasts with the “mediation model” based on co-management and dialogue.* Regarding RQ3, relating to the perception of the usage Agreement, *responses reveal that the Agreement is something not fully understood and of which the mechanisms are difficult to comprehend.*

We recognize that our study was limited in terms of the number of participants. We believe that adding more participants can further confirm the results by extending the study to individuals from different backgrounds,

For the future, also an increase in specific research on mobile, especially at the qualitative level, is hoped for, precisely to intercept increasingly complex practices. The smartphone has allowed adolescents to gain greater influence in negotiations with parents, and although we might think that parents continue to maintain control and authority by “invading” their children’s space (Williams & Williams, 2005), we need to reflect on some aspects.

The first aspect to consider is that young people’s communicative and digital practices increasingly take place outside the family and beyond the domestic environment, in a “diffuse space” that mobile and digital technologies are constantly redefining (Hasan *et al.*, 2020).

The second aspect to consider is that artificial intelligence will further complicate future scenarios.

Therefore, the future should lead to a “shared digital awareness”, both by children and parents, to establish a space for mediation, dialogue, and



collaboration, based primarily on the model of Digital Literacy. In this context, we can refer to “Family Digital Literacy Practices” (Terras & Ramsay, 2016), which can be defined as the way(s) in which children and their families interact to jointly shape their behaviors with digital media. This literacy should consider the needs of both young people and adults, and above all, the real importance of mobile technology in society. We can also reflect on mobile media education as a tool to reduce problematic smartphone use (Gui *et al.*, 2023) but it is necessary to think about a broad meaning of digital literacy, which is closely connected to skills.

In this sense, it is increasingly important to work on digital skills and transmedia skills (Scolari, 2018), as they involve aspects such as social management, engaging ethical considerations, and demonstrating the ability to manage a complex apparatus that intertwines real and digital dimensions.

However, the indispensable reference to Media Literacy should be accompanied by the structuring of clear and systematic rules aimed at limiting the impact of content conveyed through smartphones, in line with what AGCOM recently did in Italy, by publishing, in early 2024, Resolution 7/24/CONS, “Guidelines aimed at ensuring compliance with the provisions of the consolidated text by influencers and the establishment of a dedicated technical committee”.

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